

### Dancing in a Mine Field

Michigan Annual Conference  
Opening Worship - Virtual

July 26, 2020  
Bishop David Alan Bard

**Texts:** Mark 4:1-9

Friends I greet you in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and peace and power of the Holy Spirit. I greet you joyously, and, I also greet you with a heart that is heavy with grief and loss and sadness. God grant us grace to hold all this together in our hearts and in our life together as church.

The words of Romans 1:11-12 seem fitting. “For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” How I long to be together for our mutual encouragement, but it is not safe to gather as we have in the past, 2000 people seated in such a way that we might desire a little social distance. Now social distance is a requirement of caring for each other. So, we are doing our best and gather like this. It has been my on-going prayer that this worship service might offer some spiritual gift to strengthen you.

I grieve even as I affirm the need to change how we meet this year for Annual Conference. Our theme is “Sowing Seeds: rooting, tending, reaping.” Our focus was to be congregational vibrancy. Annual Conference is much less vibrant that we are not face-to-face. The Rev. Jasmine Smothers, a dynamic young African-American woman, pastor at First United Methodist Church in Atlanta, and a good colleague and friend, was scheduled to be our guest preacher and teacher. We will ask her back, but even before that, I encourage you to look her up on the web sometime to hear her preach. I hope you will wait until after this worship service!

I also want to take a moment to remember with gratitude and fondness those persons from the Michigan Conference whose lives we recall this evening. We in the Michigan Conference are deeply grateful for the service of those we have named, and we extend our heartfelt condolences to their family members. God's love embrace you warmly. Thinking of those who are no longer with us, my heart is also filled with joy for their lives and ministries.

Let's pause for a moment to remember again these people with deep gratitude.

Thank you.

Fair warning here – awkward transition ahead. How many of you play games on your phone or tablet? If we were together, I think I would see quite a few hands. One of the first games I played that way was Minesweeper. Minesweeper has been around since 1989, well before my first iphone, and it remains a game I enjoy playing, though I don't have it on my current phone. The object of the game is to click on small squares while avoiding the mined squares. Squares adjacent to the mines have numbers, so there is a logic element to it all. It is pretty low tech, all things considered, but enjoyable for a few minutes now and again.

When I first began thinking about this annual conference sermon last fall - doesn't that seem like a long, long time ago – when I first began thinking about this sermon I thought about Minesweeper and I thought I would be preaching about a specific set of mines at Annual Conference. This opening annual conference sermon would have been preached just a couple of weeks following General Conference. I would have been preaching about mine fields around potential division within the denomination. One of my favorite authors, Joan Chittister writes in a recent book, “the world is a land mine of differences” ([The Time is Now](#), 13). The sermon would have wanted to help navigate our differences over how LGBTQ persons should be

included in the church, even as we would be breaking apart over those differences. Step carefully to avoid the mines.

In recent weeks and months, though, all kinds of new mines have been laid. Images of the coronavirus look a little like the landmines in mine sweeper game, and wow has the coronavirus laid mines and changed the landscape. Just look at us tonight. I have often thought about our annual conference session at Albion College on March 7. We could not have met in that same space just a week later, and that we were not a virus hot spot is something for which I give deep thanks to God. We avoided a mine there. Following the advice of public health experts, days later I asked our churches to suspend in-person gatherings, including worship. It was not a decision made lightly and I thank you all for doing what you have done to keep people healthy and safe. I thank you for continuing to make decisions based on public health, the common good and the well-being of others. Yet statements and recommendations about how to meet and gather are a mine field.

That's often because in our day and time, few differences escape becoming politicized and polarized. It seems that most people agree on handwashing, and I've not seen any stinging partisan debates about brands of soap, but masks? For some they have become a political statement, to wear or not to wear. For others they have become an occasion for behavioral tantrums. How else do you describe a woman in a grocery store who when asked to put on her mask as she approached the checkout line began throwing items out of her cart and on to the floor? When you gather for worship or in small groups, please wear a mask, no matter your politics. I jumped right on that land mine!

The coronavirus has been devastating for many people. Health care workers have been stretched. The economic impact has been staggering. People have lost loved ones, family and friends. And the impact has not been distributed equally. Communities of color - black, Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx have been more adversely affected by COVID-19.

The racial disparities in the impact of the coronavirus, however, moved off center stage for awhile when an ugly incident of race-based violence exploded on to our television sets and mobile phones. The brutal killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police has seared our consciences. It has brought to the fore deep racial divides and exposed painful wounds. Conversations about policing, its methods, and the racial disparities in how people encounter law enforcement, are mine fields. Recent gun violence in cities like Chicago and Atlanta have added mines to the landscape of this conversation.

Addressing race, racism, white privilege has long been a mine field. Politicization and polarization often mark and mar such conversations. We lack a common vocabulary to discuss our complex history and reality, and there seems no shortage of people who, if you don't say it right, well, you've stepped on a mine. Yet there is no question that we need to grapple with racism in our conference, in our churches, in our lives. I am working with conference and church leadership to form an anti-bias, anti-racism working group for the Michigan United Methodist Church. This group will help the conference look at itself. It will help encourage and provide resources for local church anti-bias, anti-racism work. This is not easy work. Grappling with racism, though, is an essential part of our journey with Jesus, and inviting people to and helping them along their journey with Jesus is at the heart of congregational vibrancy. I would also add, as I preached in a sermon over the July 4 weekend, we always grapple in an

atmosphere of grace. Grappling with racism in an atmosphere of grace means steering away from apathy and self-righteousness. May we avoid planting more mines in the field as we engage this work together.

So, what does this nice agricultural story from first-century Palestine, told by Jesus, a story about planting in a field, have to say to us in the midst of the mine fields of our contemporary world?

It is a story about grace, grace freely bestowed, grace flung widely, lavishly and with abandon, grace for all. “Listen! A sower went out to sow.” He sows wildly, tossing seeds to and fro. God’s love. God’s grace. For you. For me. For all. **ALL!** The reason we care about racism, about the demeaning of others, is because we recognize that all people are created in the image of God. We affirm that all are loved by God. We affirm that Christ died for all. **ALL.** We are committed to making that more real in our churches, our communities, our world.

Though the story seems to be about all, let’s admit that it might be read comparatively and competitively. “Some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and it brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

What can you do? Some seed just finds inhospitable ground. Glad that’s not me. So glad I am really good soil – deep, rich, profound. The church has a long history of super spirituality and self-righteousness, beginning with the New Testament. I Corinthians anyone?

Vibrant churches help people grow, and help them avoid making their growth in faith, hope, love, grace a comparative game. I worry about that, too, when the church grapples with tough issues, that we turn it into a comparative game. If ever you find yourself focusing on how much progress you've made relative to others, watch out. You may have made less progress than you think. If ever you find yourself seeing others as beyond change, perpetually shallow soil, watch out. You may be the one getting scorched.

Soil and sower, both speak powerfully to congregational vibrancy even in the challenging context we find ourselves in today. Let me explore each in turn.

We often focus on soil types when reading this story told by Jesus. We are encouraged to do the work to make the soil of our souls rich, deep, and profound. We believe that God can do that in our lives. Vibrant churches invite people into the journey with Jesus and help them grow, help them develop better soil so that the grace and love of God can be deeply rooted in their lives and flow from those lives into the world.

Vibrant churches are about the work of preparing better soil for the deeper planting of God's love and grace within the human heart, mind, and soul. We desire that our lives become places where God's love shines, where God's compassion flourishes, where God's dream of a better world – more just and peaceful, finds becomes deeply rooted and flows out generously.

Sometimes to give God's love and grace better soil, we have to root out some weeds. Racism is such a weed. As pressing as anti-bias and anti-racism work are right now, it is also not the only work we need to be doing. Hate is a weed that takes up space meant for God's love and grace. Anger help on to for too long can be such a weed. Anger has its place in the Christian life – anger over harm done, anger over power abused, anger over injustice. Paul

wrote, “be angry but do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26). Anger can awaken us and move us, but its use is transitory and hanging on to it poisons our soil. If anger is your default emotional response to the world, that is a problem. Untended wounds from our past can take up too much space in our hearts and souls.

Vibrant churches are about the work of preparing better soil for the deeper planting of God’s love and grace within the human heart, mind, and soul. We are such places when we live out one of our baptismal pledges, the one where we promise persons being baptized and those with them that we will “surround you with a community of love and forgiveness.” To do our soil preparation work, including anti-bias, anti-racism work, we need to create communities of love and forgiveness.

Communities of love and forgiveness, sounds beautiful, wonderful in a baptismal liturgy, but we know real change is needed. We need to keep changing in our own lives, and if we are, as the church, to be around into the future, we know that the church has to change as well. The coronavirus has forced dramatic change on most of us, and much of that change, as in our technological abilities, has been good. We are learning new ways to connect and stay connected with others.

Yet change is difficult. Change of any kind is difficult – change in habits, change in the way we do things, change in our self-understanding, change in our understanding of the world and how we relate to each other in the world. Management consultant Edgar Schein discusses the challenge of change in his work. “You recognize the need to change, the need to give up some old habits and ways of thinking, and the necessity of learning new habits and ways of thinking. But the minute you accept the need to change, you also begin to experience learning

anxiety.” (The Corporate Culture Survival Guide, 121). Learning anxiety comes from fear of being temporarily incompetent while we learn, or being punished for that, temporary incompetence, fear of loss of identity, fear of loss of group membership. Learning anxiety evokes defensive responses which minimize the need to create change. The way to push forward to change, according to Schein, is to lower learning anxiety by “increasing the learner’s sense of psychological safety” (124). Safety is different from comfort. Change will be uncomfortable, but we can engage it more safely. We might say change becomes possible when we create a community of love and forgiveness in the spirit of Jesus.

Congregational vibrancy is about preparing better soil for the deeper planting of God’s love and grace within the human heart, mind, and soul. We desire that our lives become places where God’s love shines, where God’s compassion flourishes, where God’s dream of a better world – more just and peaceful finds a foothold and flows out. It is about rooting out weeds. Preparing better soil is about creating the conditions for learning and growth. It is about living into our baptismal promise of creating communities of love and forgiveness. The coming months will continue to challenge us to create such communities – an on-going pandemic, the on-going divisions about human sexuality and a likely division within The United Methodist Church, the tough work of anti-bias and anti-racism. Create them anyway. Prepare good soil.

The other significant place to our attention on this story that speaks powerfully to congregational vibrancy is on the sower, the farmer, the planter. Picture the sower seeds flying out wildly, generously, abundantly, almost wastefully. Picture the sower enjoying the sunshine of the day, a breeze blowing on face, through hair (I like to imagine hair), arms moving gracefully dipping into a seed bag and then casting the seeds about with abandon. Picture the

sower in the joy of the work, feet moving rhythmically, dancing about the field to sow those seeds.

This is an image of vibrancy, vibrancy for our lives, vibrancy for our churches. Life in Jesus is meant to be a joyous dance, even when learning some of the dance might be challenging. The church is meant to be a vibrant community of love and forgiveness, justice and joy. Seeds from God of grace and love, of compassion and reconciliation, of hope and healing, of justice and joy, seeds of transformation - personal and social, have been sown in us by Jesus. We tend those seeds so that our lives produce fruit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). What is at the heart of fruit? Seeds, new seeds to be sown in the world.

Vibrant churches are churches where seeds are rooted and tended and then sown with wild abandon. We are to be that sower, seeds flying out wildly, generously, abundantly, almost wastefully, arms moving gracefully dipping into a seed bag and then casting the seeds about with abandon, feet joyfully and rhythmically dancing about as seeds are scattered.

And we do this in the mine field of our world today, our world with the coronavirus running rampant, with the ugliness of racism seared in our minds, with church schism knocking at our door, with politicization and polarization threatening meaningful conversations and caring relationships. There are mines aplenty, and that's not to mention the trend toward less religious participation and some of the difficult history of the church which has contributed to that. It is a challenging time to be the church, yet the world needs the church at such a time as this. The world needs the seeds we are to scatter with joyful abandon, dancing in the minefields – seeds of grace and love, of compassion and reconciliation, of hope and healing, of

justice and joy, seeds of transformation - personal and social. We cannot ignore the mines, neither can we refuse to dance. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann shares words from an early post-New Testament Christian writing: "The universe belongs to the dancer. The person who does not dance does not know what is happening" (Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, 19). Keep sowing seeds, keep dancing the dance.

There is a wonderful prose poem related to the parable of the sower that I would like to share with you. The author is Stephen Mitchell. (The Gospels in Our Image, ed. David Curzon, 119)

*A sower went forth to sow. Some of his seeds fell upon stony places. Centuries passed; millennia. And the seeds remained. And the stones crumbled and became good soil, and the seeds brought forth fruit.*

*"Wait a minute," said one listener. "You can't play fast and loose that way with the natural facts. The seeds would die long before the soil could receive them."*

*"Why would they die?"*

*"Because they can't hold out in stony places, for thousands of years."*

*"But, my dear, what kind of seeds do you think we're talking about."*

What kind of seeds, my dears, do you think we're talking about, and what kind of dance do we dance? Our seeds are seeds of seeds of grace and love, of compassion and reconciliation, of hope and healing, of justice and joy, seeds of transformation - personal and social. Keep sowing seeds, keep dancing the dance, even in the mine field.

Finally, I have been thinking about another poem, one entitled "Freedom's Plow" by Langston Hughes. I will share the final chorus with you.

*A long time ago,*

*An enslaved people heading toward freedom*

*Made up a song:*

*Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold on!*

*That plow plowed a new furrow*

*Across the field of history.*

*Into that furrow the freedom seed was dropped.*

*From that seed a tree grew, is growing, will ever grow.  
That tree is for everybody,  
For all America, for all the world.  
May its branches spread and its shelter grow  
Until all races and all peoples know its shade.*

KEEP YOUR HAND ON THE PLOW!  
HOLD ON!

Seeds being sown, getting rooted, being tended, fruit flourishing, new seeds for sowing – seeds of grace and love, of compassion and reconciliation, of hope and healing, of justice and joy, seeds of transformation - personal and social, and yes, seeds of freedom. What kind of seeds do you think we are talking about, my dear? Seeds from the God of Jesus Christ, seeds whose final transformative effect we may never fully know. Keep sowing seeds, keep dancing the dance, even in the mine field. That's what congregation vibrancy in God's Spirit is all about, soil work and seed work, rooting, tending, sowing, sowing while dancing with joy.

This world is filled with mines, forces that break and maim and deepen hurt and destruction, and our task from Jesus is clear: Keep sowing seeds, keep dancing the dance.

The world is wounded and broken and we have seeds of healing. Keep sowing seeds, keep dancing the dance. Keep your hand on the plow, hold on!

The world is wracked by illness and suffering, and we have seeds of healing and compassion. Keep sowing seeds, keep dancing the dance. Keep your hand on the plow, hold on!

The world is marred by racism and bias, tearing at the fabric of communities, a noxious weed that needs to be removed, and we have seeds of justice and hope and reconciliation and love. Keep sowing seeds, keep dancing the dance. Keep your hand on the plow, hold on!

Human lives are trapped by addiction, addiction to substances that sap life, addiction to patterns of behavior that kill the soul, and we have seeds of freedom and forgiveness and grace. Keep sowing seeds, keep dancing the dance. Keep your hand on the plow, hold on!

We have good news of God's grace and love to share, good news for all, for **ALL!** We have seeds of grace and love, of compassion and reconciliation, of hope and healing, of justice and joy, seeds of transformation - personal and social.

Keep sowing seeds.

Keep dancing the dance.

Keep your hand on the plow, hold on.

May it be so in the grace of Jesus Christ and in the power of God's Spirit. Amen.